

The Necessity and Nature of the New Birth

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Now may I encourage you to turn with me in your own Bibles to the Gospel of John. And we shall read the last three verses of chapter 2 beginning with verse 23 and read through to verse 15 of chapter 3. John 2:23, describing activity in the life of Jesus, John writes,

"Now when He was in Jerusalem at the passover, during the feast, many believed on His name, beholding His signs which He did. But Jesus did not trust Himself unto them, for that He knew all men, and because He needed not that any one should bear witness concerning man; for He Himself knew what was in man. Now there was a man of the Pharisees, named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews: the same came unto Him by night, and said to Him, Rabbi [or teacher], we know that Thou art a teacher come from God; for no one can do these signs that Thou doest, except God be with Him. Jesus answered and said unto Him, Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except one be born anew [or born again or born from above], he cannot see the kingdom of God. Nicodemus saith unto Him, How can a man be born when he is old? can he enter a second time into his mother's womb, and be born? Jesus answered, Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except one be born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh; and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Marvel not that I said unto thee, Ye must be born anew. The wind bloweth where it will, and thou hearest the voice thereof, but knowest not whence it cometh, and whither it goeth: so is every one that is born of the Spirit. Nicodemus answered and said unto Him, How can these things be? Jesus answered and said unto him, Art thou the teacher of Israel, and understandest not these things? Verily, verily, I say unto thee, We speak that which we know, and bear witness of that which we have seen; and ye receive not our witness. If I told you earthly things and ye believe not, how shall ye believe if I tell you heavenly things? And no one hath ascended into heaven, but He that descended out of heaven, even the Son of man, who is in heaven. And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of man be lifted up; that whosoever believeth may in him have eternal life."

As many of you are well aware, it was in the summer of 1962 that I began my ministry to what is now known as Trinity Baptist Church. That means I've completed some 38 years of ministry among you. By any standard, 38 years is a lengthy pastoral involvement. And lengthy pastoral relationship has both its peculiar blessings and its peculiar liabilities. And among the liabilities is the tendency to forget that there are some very foundational truths of the Word of God that need to be declared again and again with some degree of sanctified repetition. And the tendency in a lengthy pastorate is, as one is continually breaking new ground (and of necessity is doing that) in the exposition of the Word of God, to forget that there are some very basic truths to which we must come back again and again if those of us who minister

are to be faithful to the souls for whom we shall give an account in the last day. And one such truth is the truth that we're going to consider together tonight, a truth I've not preached on in a focused way for almost seven years. As I've checked the records of my past sermons, I have mentioned this truth numerous times. We touched upon it briefly when we were working our way through 1 Peter, chapter 1 and verse 23. And it is the truth of the necessity and the nature of the new birth. Or stated more simply and more personally, why you, why I must be born again if we are to see, if we are to enter the kingdom of heaven.

The passage we are to examine together has peculiar relevance to us in this particular congregation because, as we have seen in our reading of the passage, it is the record of the dealings of our Lord Jesus, not with a raw pagan, not with a relatively non-religious, half breed, immoral Jewess that we commonly identify as the woman of Samaria. Her record is given in chapter 4 of John's Gospel. But it is our Lord Jesus dealing with someone who has a sterling religious background. He was born as a son of the covenant. He has been reared within the womb of the nurture of the knowledge of God contained in the Old Testament Scriptures. He is a man upright in his external life and conduct. And he has become so knowledgeable and proficient in conveying that knowledge that Jesus refers to him in chapter 3 and verse 10 as the teacher of Israel. In other words, he had gained notoriety as an instructor of others. His grasp upon the truth of God's Word was so thorough and so comprehensive. I lived through the period when if you were to say anywhere in the United Kingdom the doctor said such and such, everyone knew to whom you were referring. There was but one doctor; that was Dr. Martin Lloyd-Jones. And in Christian circles, all you needed to say was the doctor. He was the doctor in the United Kingdom. Well, in a similar way, this man Nicodemus has come up through the ranks of the mere ordinary instructors and has gained the reputation of being so knowledgeable and so proficient in the conveyance of that knowledge that he is called the teacher in Israel.

The Lord Jesus who knew what was in man (verse 25 of chapter 2) deals with this man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus out of the knowledge of this man's true spiritual condition. He does not deal with him in terms of what Nicodemus may think himself to be, what others may perceive him to be, but what He, the Lord Jesus, knows him to be. And as surely as John can say of Jesus in the days of his earthly ministry that he needed not that anyone should bear witness concerning man for He Himself knew what was in man, so, sitting here tonight, the Lord Jesus knows you and He knows me. And His knowledge is not limited by what we might appear to be to others, what others may think us to be, but what He knows us infallibly to be.

I want us to come to this passage tonight and consider these very sobering words of the Lord Jesus in which He addresses with Nicodemus the necessity and the nature of the new birth, or "You must be born again." And we'll do so under these two headings: first of all, the necessity for the new birth established. Note how repeatedly our Lord affirms the necessity of the new birth. In verse 3, He says to Nicodemus, "[Truly, truly, amen, amen]...." He who is Truth incarnate, whenever He prefaces His statements the "amen" or the "verily" or the "truly" and much more with the double "amen, amen", He is underscoring with His own verbal marker the tremendous importance of what He is about to say. And He says to this man Nicodemus who comes (and we must not read in false motives of flattery) acknowledging what he perceives of Jesus of Nazareth, having seen His miracles (he said, "No one can do these signs that Thou doest, except God be with him. [You are a teacher who has

come from God. Your signs, Your miracles validate Your identity]"--Jesus abruptly breaks into this exchange and says to Nicodemus,

"Verily, verily, I say unto thee [in particular, Nicodemus], Except one [anyone, man or woman, boy or girl, living in Jerusalem, living in Samaria, living anywhere in Judea, living to the ends of the earth, living in the 1st century, living in the 2nd century, living in the 10th century, living in the 20th, or as some say, the 21st century] be born anew, he cannot see the kingdom of God."

Jesus turns to Nicodemus, and speaking to him in particular, He broadens His statement into a general statement applicable to every man, woman, boy, or girl that has ever lived on God's earth when He says, "Except one be born anew, he cannot see the kingdom of God." And when our Lord said he cannot see, He is saying he cannot in his experience enter in to see. Or more likely what he is saying, he cannot perceive the reality and the nature of the kingdom of God.

"Nicodemus, you come to Me as the teacher in Israel. You come to Me out of the womb of many Godly wholesome influences that have grounded you in much of the teaching of the Old Testament Scriptures. You come to Me as one whose life is taken up in religious concerns and activities and relationships. But Nicodemus, settle this, amen, amen, I say to you, except one is born anew, he is a dunce in the matters of the kingdom of God. Except one be born again, born anew, born from above, he cannot perceive the kingdom of God."

Then our Lord goes on in verse 5 after Nicodemus responds, "How can a man be born when he is old? can he enter a second time into his mother's womb, and be born? [What kind of nonsense, Jesus, are you talking about? This is ridiculous. Can one go back into his mother's womb and be pushed out again in a second physical birth?]" Jesus responds (verse 5): "Jesus answered, Verily, verily [the double amen, His own underscoring of the tremendous importance of His words], I say unto thee [in particular, Nicodemus], Except one [anyone at any time, at any place, under any circumstances] be born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God." Beginning in the same way with underscoring His own authority, the Lord now generalizes His speaking to Nicodemus and says,

"[Nicodemus, this birth again, this birth from above is a spiritual birth effecting true cleansing from sin. It is a spiritual birth effected by the person and work of the Holy Spirit.] Except one be born of water [referring to a spiritual birth involving true spiritual cleansing from spiritual defilement] and of the Spirit [the Holy Spirit Himself imparting divine life to a hitherto dead soul. Notice the solemn words], he cannot enter into the kingdom of God."

If anyone at any place, at any time, in any circumstances, enters the kingdom of God without being born of water and of the Spirit, Jesus Christ is not Truth incarnate. It's just that simple. Our Lord boxes all of us up with His own truthfulness saying, "Verily, verily [truly, truly, amen, amen], I say to you [Nicodemus--but you are simply in this personal exchange, the theater in which I want to proclaim to all men of all time], Except one be born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God." He cannot enter it now in this life. He will not enter it in its consummate glory at the second coming of the Lord Jesus.

"Nicodemus, you and all men need a spiritual birth that in its very essence is a birth that results in real, deep, basic, fundamental cleansing from defilement--born of water and a radical, pervasive, all-encompassing transformation, ethically and morally and spiritually wrought by the person and power of the Holy Spirit Himself."

Then in verse 7: "Marvel not that I said unto thee [in particular, Nicodemus], Ye must [it is absolutely necessary for you to] be born anew." He says, "Nicodemus, don't be amazed at what I've said. Do not marvel that I said unto you, you must be born again." And so three times within short compass, Jesus affirms the necessity of the new birth. Two of the three, He affirms it by moving from a particular and pointed word to Nicodemus into the general statement, "Except one be born [from above], he cannot see the kingdom of God...Except one be born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God." And Christ's word to you and to me is His word to Nicodemus, "[Therefore], marvel not that I said unto thee, Ye must be born [again]." Settle it, without going into the particulars of what the new birth involves and what are the evidences and the fruits of it, settle this, and settle it in the first person singular, and say to yourself sitting where you are, "Unless I am born anew, I cannot see the kingdom. Unless I am born of water and the Spirit, I will not enter the kingdom." We must make it that personal because Christ does. He speaks to us in His Word saying to us as clearly as He said to Nicodemus that the new birth is a necessity if we would enter the kingdom.

It is said that George Whitefield in the course of his amazing ministry, preaching the Gospel on both sides of the Atlantic, preached on the theme of the new birth at least 300 hundred times in the course of his ministry. He was not a resident pastor. He was an itinerate evangelist. And it's reported that on one occasion someone who had heard him preach apparently more than once on the theme said, "Mr. Whitefield, why are you always preaching 'You must be born again?'" to which Whitefield is reported to have replied, "Because you must be born again." Very simple. I repeat my sermons on the new birth because it is absolutely essential if men are to enter, if men are to see the kingdom of God. No new birth, no heaven; no heaven, only hell. Now can I make it more simple than that? No purgatory, no mediating place. No new birth, no heaven; no heaven, only hell.

Has that got some of you at least half-inclined for a change to really listen through the ears of your soul, not to deliberately bring into your mind every distracting thought to somehow tolerate another sermon and that preacher that bellers and hollers--get it over with and get home. My dear friend, your indifference won't change the reality--no new birth, no heaven; no heaven, only hell. May I plead with you at the most low rung of self-interest. Don't you value your never-dying soul enough to listen with a degree of concentration and seriousness to what Jesus has to say about the new birth? He comes to you in spite of your repeated patterns of stiff-arming Him and indifference and hostility. You're still alive. You're in the land of the living breathing His air. And once again He comes to you in the overtures of grace and mercy and pity in the preaching of His Word. O, that you might hear Him as He speaks in the Scriptures.

So we see first of all the necessity of the new birth affirmed, but then now note in verse 6: the necessity of the new birth explained. Our Lord has affirmed we must be born again. Without the new birth, we cannot see the kingdom. Without this birth of water and of the Spirit, we cannot enter. We must be born again. But now here in verse 6, the Lord Jesus explains this necessity. Why is it necessary that men,

women, boys, and girls be born again, born of water and of the Spirit to see and enter the kingdom? Jesus tells us: "That which is born of the flesh is flesh; and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Marvel not that I said unto thee, Ye must be born anew." The statement of verse 7 is the deduction from verse 6. "In the light of this reality," Jesus said, "that that which is born of the flesh is flesh, that which is born of the Spirit is spirit, don't marvel that I said unto you, you must be born anew."

The explanation as to why we need another birth, a new birth, a birth from above, a birth of water and of the Spirit is bound up in these simple words: "That which is born of the flesh is flesh." Now what do those words mean? Well, simply this (and I believe the commentator Hendrikson has hit the nail right on the head in this simple explanation): sinful human nature produces sinful human nature. That's it. That which is born of the flesh, that which is born in natural human generation, that which possesses nothing but what was given by Momma and Daddy in Momma's womb and that which comes out of her womb, that which is born of the flesh is flesh. Sinful human nature produces sinful human nature.

"Therefore, Nicodemus, don't Marvel that I said unto you, you must be born anew, you must be born from above, born again, a birth, not a repetition of your natural birth, for that would simply bring you forth as your first birth brought you forth. That which is born of the flesh once, twice, a hundred times is flesh. And only that which is birthed by the Spirit partakes of the nature and character of the Spirit. That which is born of the flesh is flesh."

And what are the characteristics of sinful human nature as it is present in everyone of us when we are brought forth from our mother's wombs? Well, we are brought forth fleshy in that we have a native enmity to God Himself. Turn to Romans 8 where the same word for flesh is used. And here the Apostle Paul describes the fundamental mindset of the flesh: "That which is born of the flesh is flesh." And as flesh, it is enmity to God Himself. Verse 7: "because the mind of the flesh is [now notice, it doesn't say 'it possesses', or 'it has some', or 'it is afflicted with a disposition of'. No, the mind of the flesh is] enmity against God; [it is enmity itself] for it is not subject to the law of God, neither indeed can it be." The mindset with which you and I are conceived and born is one massive clinched fist against Almighty God. It is enmity to God.

And how does that enmity manifest itself? By its non-subjection to the law of God. You see that in the text? How do we know it is enmity? "For it is not subject to the law of God." And furthermore, Paul says it is hopelessly in that condition if left to itself ("neither indeed can it be"). If you are conceived and born with that mindset that is yours by nature, unless Almighty God intervenes, you will die and go off into an eternal hell to live forever with that enmity. "The mind of the flesh is enmity against God; for it is not subject to the law of God, neither indeed can it be." The word "can" is a word of ability. It cannot be, it will not be, it never will be unless there's a divine intervention. Furthermore, as to what the mind perceives as reality, look at 1 Corinthians 2:14. This is God's commentary on the words of Jesus ("That which is born of the flesh is flesh.") The mindset of the flesh: enmity, non-subordination to the law of God, moral and spiritual inability to change itself. Now we come to verse 14 of 1 Corinthians 2:

"Now the natural man [the man, the woman, the boy or girl who has nothing but what he's received in terms of his own natural generation. He has human life. He has a

marred image-bearing capacity of God, but that's all he has] receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God [and in the context, the things of the Spirit of God are the truths revealed to the apostles and embodied in the apostolic writings, the truths surrounding Jesus as God's only begotten Son, the only Savior, the things that for ages and generations were hid and not revealed, but Paul says are now revealed unto us by the Spirit--'which things we speak in words which the Spirit teaches.' And he says, 'The natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God.' He sees nothing in Christ to get excited about. He does not see Him as the Pearl of great price for whom it is natural and delightful to sell all to obtain Him. He does not see Christ as the treasure hidden in the field. He sees nothing glorious in Christ, nothing attractive in a life of holiness, nothing attractive about the people of God. The things of the Spirit of God, he does not receive them. Why?]: for they are foolishness unto him [unworthy of serious consideration]."

That's a description of some of you sitting here tonight. If Mommy and Daddy and the pressure of family had not brought you here, this is the last place you would be. Why? This stuff is foolishness to you. Your latest rock group, that turns you on. Your latest hobby, that turns you on. Your latest sensual thrill, that turns you on. But Christ and heaven and God and holiness and the people of God doesn't register. Why? It's foolishness unto you. Now look at the text. Not only does Paul say, "The natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness unto him; and he cannot know them, because they are spiritually [examined, and he has no faculty with which to examine them]." Why? "That which is born of the flesh is flesh."

"Marvel not that I said unto thee, Ye must be born anew. [Nicodemus, I've told you, except a man be born of the Spirit, born from above, born of water and the Spirit, he cannot see, he cannot perceive the kingdom of God.]" Here the king stands in front of Nicodemus and he doesn't see Him for who He is. "O, we know You're a teacher come from God." Jesus went on in this passage to say, "I am the Son of Man who, even as I speak to you, I am in heaven, and I've come from heaven, and yet in My divine nature, I fill heaven and earth. Nicodemus, I am more than some prophet validating my identity as a teacher from God with miracles. I am God incarnate, and you can't see it until you're born again." That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and as flesh, it is enmity to God. As flesh, it is blind to spiritual realities. Furthermore, as flesh, it brings forth works contrary to the law of God. That's what flesh does. Turn to Galatians 5. Let the Scriptures interpret the words of Jesus in John 3. Here in Galatians 5:19: "Now the works of the flesh are manifest...." "That which is born of the flesh is flesh." It acts like flesh. It manifests flesh. And what are they? He focuses first upon the sins of sexual impurity:

"Fornication [pornia], uncleanness, lasciviousness [unbridled lust], idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousies, wraths, factions, divisions, parties, envyings, drunkenness, revellings, [and Paul says, 'I haven't completed the list'], and such like; of which I forewarn you, even as I did forewarn you, that they who practise such things shall not inherit the kingdom of God."

"That which is born of the flesh is flesh." It partakes of the fleshy enmity to God. It partakes of the spiritual blindness to the things of God. It brings forth the works contrary to the law of God. And this is the most humbling of all, but Jesus stated it in spades, and I must not hold back from saying it. Flesh is utterly impotent to even get to the only One who can change it. Listen to the words of Jesus in John 6, words when He spoke them cut the very nerve centers of the pride and the religious

smugness of the Jewish leaders of His day. It even penetrated into the ranks of apparent disciples and caused many of them to go back and to walk with Him no more. And what were those words? Verses 43-44: "Jesus answered and said unto them, Murmur not among yourselves. No man can [a word of ability] come to Me, except the Father that sent Me draw him: and I will raise him up in the last day." They were offended. And Jesus didn't say, "I'm sorry, you misunderstood Me. I was just overstating it a little bit for effect." No, Jesus had been speaking of Himself as the bread come down from heaven, as the One who came down from heaven to do the will of the Father. And the Jews murmured because He made such a claim ("I'm the bread that came down out of heaven"), even though He's offering to anyone who will eat of Him by faith. And then Jesus tells them their condition is rooted in what they are: "No man can come to Me, except the Father that sent Me draw him." You say, "Well, maybe the Lord didn't quite mean it." O yes He did, and He repeats it down in verse 65: "For this cause have I said unto you, that no man can come unto Me, except it be given unto him of the Father."

"That which is born of the flesh is flesh." What is its condition that it desperately needs a divine birth, a birth of water and of the Spirit? "That which is born of the flesh is flesh." It is in its mindset enmity to God, "is not subject to His law, neither indeed can it be", is blind to spiritual realities and cannot receive them, brings forth the works contrary to the law of God and is spiritually impotent. We must, we must, we must be cleansed of our defilement to be fit for the presence of a holy God. We must be renewed by the Holy Spirit to be given a faculty to see the beauty and the glory and the realities of that kingdom as they focus on the King Himself, the Lord Jesus, and all of the blessed realities purchased by His own precious blood. But "except one be born anew, he cannot see.... Except one be born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God."

That's our Lord's teaching on the necessity of the new birth. Now let me ask you, do you feel flattered by that? I don't, but I'm thankful that He loves us enough to tell us the truth about it. Never forget this: the person who loves you the most is the one who tells you the most truth about yourself, not the one who tells you what your flesh might want to hear. No doubt, Nicodemus could have found a half a dozen of his fellow leaders in Israel who would have stroked him up one side and down the other and said, "Nicodemus, if anybody's going to make it into the kingdom, surely, you are. Look at you Nicodemus--separated one, knowledgeable one, useful one (the teacher in Israel)." And Jesus levels him and brings him down to the same level of the vilest, most besotted drunk, drug addict, sexually immoral person, destitute, the lines of sin etched upon the face. And Jesus said, "[You're all lumped together.] That which is born of the flesh is flesh." The differences observed by men are relatively inconsequential. "That which is born of the flesh is flesh. That which is born of the Spirit is spirit."

Well, then we come secondly to see what our Lord Jesus teaches about the nature of the new birth illustrated. This language puzzles this man Nicodemus. Jesus said it should not puzzle him because the Lord had spoken about it, particularly in passages such as Ezekiel, chapter 36, when speaking in language that is clearly identified in the book of Hebrews, chapters 8 and 10, as new covenant language. God had said, "I will sprinkle clean water upon you, and ye shall be clean: from all your filthiness, and from all your idols, will I cleanse you. A new heart also will I give you, and a new spirit will I put within you." Nicodemus is utterly ignorant of these things. And Jesus is going to teach him something not only of the necessity of the new birth, but the

nature of the new birth illustrated. Look at verse 8: "The wind bloweth where it will, and thou hearest the voice [or sound] thereof, but knowest not whence it cometh, and whither it goeth: so is every one that is born of the Spirit." In this way, after this pattern illustrated by the activity of the wind, Jesus said, "You may understand something of the nature of the new birth." And what are the elements of the activity of the wind, not spun out of a preacher's imagination but highlighted by Jesus Himself. "The wind bloweth where it will." Now we know the wind has no will of its own. Behind the wind is the Lord of the wind. God Himself disposes the wind. But Jesus focusing on the wind says it acts as though it had a will of it's own. "The wind bloweth where it will...so is every one that is born of the Spirit." It is a sovereign work of the Holy Spirit.

It may be a blistering hot, sultry August day in northern New Jersey. And you're out in the backyard and have been doing yard work and cutting the lawn and trimming the shrubs. And you're thirsty, and you've got a cool drink in your hand, but the sweat just pours off you. And you say, "O, if I could just snap my fingers and bring a cool refreshing breeze." But you can't snap your fingers and have the wind come at your beck and call. "The wind bloweth where it will...so is every one that is born of the Spirit." There is an unfettered but principled sovereignty in the work of the Holy spirit. The divine begetting is God's work, and He never puts it in anyone else's hands.

John 1:11-13: "He came unto His own, and they that were His own received Him not. But as many as received Him, to them gave He the right to become children of God, even to them that believe on His name: who were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God." Could words be plainer? There are many evangelicals who like to think in a very real sense that the new birth is in their control. "If we can get a person to decide for Jesus to be born again, then it's legitimate to do anything we can to get them to make their almighty decision that they might be born again." My friend, no. This text says those who received Him are those who were born. Their receiving is the manifestation of their birthing. They were birthed that they might receive. And they are birthed not according to natural blood lines ("who were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God"). The divine begetting is utterly sovereign in its origin. James 1:18 makes this plain: "Of His own will He brought us forth [a different word. It doesn't mean so much the actual birth, but the begetting, the bringing forth] by the word of truth, that we should be a kind of first-fruits of His creatures."

You say, "Pastor Martin, isn't that a doctrine that paralyzes people? No, my friend, it doesn't paralyze. It humbles. It tells you that sitting here, you in Adam and you in your own activity have done all you can to damn yourself. And you can't do a thing to save yourself. That means you're shut up to the only One who can--the God who made you, made you to be a creature dependent upon Him, to derive your life and sustenance from Him. And in Adam, you with me have gone astray and turned to our own way, gone into the God business. And God's determined to put Himself back in the God business. And nothing does it more quickly than to face realistically that that which is born of the flesh is flesh. "O God, if I ever know the divine begetting, it will be because you willed to bring me forth. You willed birth to me." The power's not in Mom and Dad. The power's not in the preacher, the evangelist, the pastor. The power's in God and God Himself and God alone. But you see, this is a wonderful doctrine of hope. Because it's God who does it, there's no one whose state as flesh is beyond the almighty power of God.

It's beautifully illustrated--I'm not saying this is the purpose of the passage, but it's a beautiful analogy and picture of Ezekiel. I read that in my own devotions a few weeks ago. God takes him out and shows him a valley of dry bones and says, "Can these bones live?" And what's the prophet say? "Sure can. I get in there and I'll motivate them. And I've got this new super duper approach to get dry bones to live. Sure, God, I'll get them to live." "Can these bones live?" And what's the prophet say? "O Lord, you know." God says, "Start speaking to the bones." What a stupid thing. Someone comes along and says, "Hey Ezekiel, what are you doing? Are you talking to somebody behind the bush?" "No, I'm talking to bones." "You're talking to Bones. Why are you talking to bones?" "Because God told me to." "What's God going to do?" "He's going to bring the bones to life." "Ezekiel, you've gone wacko. This preaching stuff has gone to your head." And what does he do? He preaches to dry bones, and suddenly flesh and sinews come over the bones. And before long, there's an army of breathing men with muscles and sinews and veins and blood, not because Ezekiel was clever, but because God is almighty.

How does the Bible picture our spiritual life? "You hath He made alive who were dead." He doesn't say, "You hath He resuscitated who had swooned in your sins." "You hath He made alive who dead in trespasses and sins, and quickened us together with Christ." It's resurrection. It's birth. It's the divine begetting. It's a sovereign work of the Spirit. And my sinner friend, that's your hope, not your despair. And my fellow believers, that's our hope, as we pray, "O God, bless Your word", as Peter says, "Having been begotten again, not of corruptible seed but incorruptible, by the Word of God that lives and abides forever." While the Word is preached, God can make dead bones live. And that's our confidence. That's our hope. "That which is born of the flesh is flesh...the wind bloweth where it will." The sovereign work of the Spirit.

Secondly, it's an effective work of the Spirit. Look again at the text: "The wind bloweth where it will." You can't tell where it started, where it came from, where it's going. You can tell neither the womb nor graveyard or the wind that blows across your face. But now notice, though you cannot tell whence it comes and whither it goes, you know the effect of it. You hear the sound, you hear the voice of it. It makes an effect that is discernable on your eardrums. You hear it whistling and rustling through the trees. You hear it in its effect. The voice, the sound of it you hear. Jesus said, "So is every one that is born of the Spirit." The new birth is not only a sovereign work of the Holy Spirit; it is an effective work of the Holy Spirit.

When we turn to the book of 1 John, John picks up this very theme that he introduces in that Gospel he was moved to write by the Holy Spirit. And listen to the effects of that wind of the Spirit blowing over a dead sinner's heart. Chapter 5 and verse 1: "Whosoever believeth that Jesus is the Christ is begotten of God." When you see someone believing that Jesus of Nazareth is none other than God's Messiah, and a man, woman, boy, or girl is prepared to commit all of his soul to all of Christ as his Prophet to teach him, his Priest to forgive and intercede for him, his King to rule over him and govern him, there's only one explanation. He's been born of the Spirit; he's been given eyes to see the kingdom as that kingdom focuses on the glory of the King as the Prophet, Priest, and King of His people. "Whosoever believeth that Jesus is the Christ is begotten of God." That's the effect of the divine wind. A person is brought to trust in, to rely upon Jesus the Christ as He's offered in the Gospel.

Chapter 3 and verse 9: "Whosoever is begotten of God [does not practice] sin, because his seed abideth in him: and he cannot [practice] sin, because he is begotten of God." "That which is born of the Spirit is spirit." And the same Spirit who testifies to Christ and makes Christ glorious and trustworthy and brings us to faith in Him brings us to Jesus as the Savior from sin and makes sin odious to us and loathsome to us and distasteful to us. And when we sin, we are out of our new native element. The divine seed within us does not let us be at home in the realm of sin, sins of thought, sins of word, sins of attitude, sins of the hands, of the feet, of the sexual organs. It doesn't matter. "Whosoever is begotten of God [does not practice] sin."

Chapter 2, verse 29 (the positive side of that): "If ye know that He [Jesus] is righteous, ye know that every one also that doeth righteousness is begotten of Him." That disposition of clinched fist is not subject to the law of God and cannot be. God says in the language of Ezekiel, He takes out the heart of stone. He gives the heart of flesh. He writes the law upon the heart, and He says, "I will cause them to keep My statutes and My judgments. I will put My fear within them that they shall never depart from Me." The wind blows. You don't know where it comes from or where it goes, but you hear its sound. It has an effect. So is everyone born of the Spirit. He believes in Christ; he commits himself to turn away from sin, commits himself to practice righteousness.

He loves the brethren. Chapter 3 and verse 14: "We know that we have passed out of death into life, because we [are loving] the brethren. He that [is not loving] abideth in death." You say you've been born of the Spirit. This will be one of the effects of the wind of the Spirit that has blown across your heart. He will engender in you a love for those in whom Christ is seen, your brethren, who love the same Christ, who've seen the same things about Christ by the work of the Spirit through the Word.

Chapter 5 and verse 4: "For whatsoever is begotten of God overcome the world: and this is the victory that hath overcome the world, even our faith." The world does not bring us to its feet simpering and whimpering for its standards and its frown and its smile and its goals. No, we take our stand against this world system, behind which is the power of the prince of the world, the devil. And we overcome the world. The world doesn't dictate our standards of dress. It doesn't dictate what we believe is acceptable to go in our eyes over our TVs or our videos or at the movie theater. It doesn't dictate how much flesh we'll bare on a beach because it's hot and we like to swim. We overcome the world wherever the world would defy Christ. In union with Christ by faith, we overcome the world. Isn't that what it says? That's what my Bible says. He that overcomes the world is he that believes that Jesus is the Son of God. And the one who believes that Jesus is the Son of God, so believes because he's been begotten of God.

Then he keeps himself. Chapter 5 and verse 18: "We know that whosoever is begotten of God [does not practice sin]; but he that was begotten of God keepeth himself, and the evil one toucheth him not." You say, "I thought the Lord keeps us." Yes, He does. Behind our keeping of ourselves is His keeping. "He ever lives to make intercession for us; therefore, He saves us to the uttermost." But the way I know Christ's intercession is saving me is when I keep myself. Christ's prayer that we be kept is answered when you keep yourself, not in your own strength but in His. Are ready to do what? Not say, "O Lord Jesus, I've got a problem with this sin. Please cut off my right hand." He says, "Sorry, that's not My job description. Mine is to pray that

you'll have grace to cut off your own right hand and cast it from you." If your hand offend you, cut it off, cast it from you. Don't ask the Lord to do it. You do it. "And if thy right eye causeth thee to stumble, pluck it out, and cast it from thee." If you're begotten of God, you're keeping yourself. And wonder of wonders, when you've hacked and hewn and thrown away, you fall on your face and say, "Lord Jesus, I never could have done that without Your grace." His keeping comes to manifestation in our keeping ourselves.

That's just five things from the book of 1 John. You don't need to know a word of Greek except that there are present tense verbs in the sinning and the keeping of righteousness, and I translated them as present tense verbs. "The wind bloweth where it will." You can't tell where it comes from or where it's goes, but you hear the sound. The new birth is not only a sovereign work of the Spirit; it is an effective, discernable work of the Spirit.

Thirdly, according to Jesus, as to its nature, like the wind, it is a mysterious work of the Spirit. Look again at verse 8 of John 3. What does our Lord say? "The wind bloweth where it will, and thou hearest the voice thereof, but knowest not whence it cometh, and whither it goeth. There's an element of mystery in the wind. And even though our meteorologist can stand on our 10 or 11 o'clock news, or whatever o'clock news you may watch, and tell us we have this cold front and this warm front and the jet stream is doing this and all the rest. At the end of the day, you say, "Yeah, but whose up there nudging the jet stream." "We think it may reach down this far, and if so, this front.... And if if if...." Who's behind settling all the ifs of the meteorologist's forecast? Blind chance? No, my Bible says He has His way in the whirlwind and the storm, and the clouds are the dust of His feet. I love to think of it when they're standing there saying, "Well, what kind of weather are you going to bring us?" What arrogance! And when they say, "Well, this front will...." Yeah, if God nudges it down a little bit, He'll fool you and everybody else. And if you get it right, it's only because God decided that you'd get it right. No, there's a mystery behind the ways of the wind. "So", Jesus said, "is every one that is born of the Spirit." It's a mysterious work of the Spirit. We can't tell its precise origin. We cannot tell when God begins that mysterious, powerful work. There is an unpredictableness in the ways of the Spirit. Did not the hymn writer catch this when he wrote,

"I know not how the Spirit moves, convincing men of sin,
Revealing Jesus in the Word, creating faith in Him.
I know not how the Spirit moves.

Can you say amen to that? There is an element of mystery. And therefore, we have no sympathy with those who want to box up the work of the Holy Spirit. "Well, you must go through three months of conviction and then three months of seeking and then three months of awakening and then three months of tentative hope that maybe you found rest in Christ. And then after six years, you'll come to solid assurance." No, no, my friend, the ways of the Spirit are like the wind. He won't be boxed up to your formula or mine. You like the way God got you into the kingdom and birthed you, fine. But He's just as free to birth someone in a way that breaks all of the basic patterns of how He dealt with you.

I look out on your faces, and I've heard the testimony of many of you sitting in my study as you come before the elders to give your testimony in preparation for membership, and I think of this verse so often. The ways of the Spirit are like the

wind. And some of you, God just blew down like a mighty torrential rain of spiritual influence. You can almost mark the day, the minute, and the hour when God rattled your cage and got your attention and showed you you were hanging over hell and revealed Christ to you and brought you out of death into life. And there are others of us, God's dealings with us were so murky. But like the hymn writer, we can say as he echoed the words of Paul, "I know whom I have believed and am persuaded that He is able to keep that which I've entrusted to Him against that day." And I know there's no way I would ever do that if I had not been born from above. So we don't trouble ourselves about saying, "Well, I didn't have this experience or that experience." There's an element of mystery. Amidst the efficacy and the sovereignty, there is mystery. And that again keeps us honest; it keeps us hopeful. We think someone's got to know this much and that much. No, no, God can take a very minimal measure of His truth and do a mighty work of divine begetting that astounds us all.

Well, we come around full circle to where we began. Jesus said to this religious man who didn't have a clue of what He was talking about, "Nicodemus, the new birth is an absolute necessity. Truly, truly, I say unto you, Except one be born again, he cannot see the kingdom; except one be born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom. Marvel not that I said unto you, You must be born again." And that birth is a sovereign work of God. That birth is an efficacious work of God and a mysterious work of God.

You sit here tonight and say, "Well, I'm not sure that I've known that work. What shall I do?" I urge you, my friend, to go right on in John chapter 3. It's not clear how much of this section of John 3 is Jesus speaking or where John enters in to give his Spirit-inspired commentary. But most careful students of the Word agree that it is Jesus speaking at least through verse 15. Verse 12: "If I told you earthly things and ye believe not, how shall ye believe if I tell you heavenly things? And no one hath ascended into heaven, but He that descended out of heaven, even the Son of man, who is in heaven. [Nicodemus, you're not talking to a teacher sent from God. You're talking to God sent down to earth. I've come out of heaven. And while I speak to you, Nicodemus, I'm in heaven. And furthermore, Nicodemus--Nicodemus, listen to me. As Moses--you know your Old Testament, Nicodemus--as Moses lifted up the serpent so that those bitten with those fiery serpents, and death was in their veins, as that serpent of brass was lifted and whoever looked lived, Nicodemus, I tell you, if you've been humbled and brought to the place where you realize all your religious upbringing and training and rituals and knowledge and all of your activity count for nothing in the court of heaven, you need a birth from above. Nicodemus, don't look into your heart. Don't put your fingers on your heart to see if you feel the motions of the divine breath. Nicodemus, come to grips with who I am and what I'm going to do when I die for sinners. Even so must the Son of man who stands before you be lifted up that whosoever believes may in Him have eternal life.]"

The Lord Jesus moves from teaching the necessity and nature of the new birth to drawing all the attention to the uniqueness of His person and the sufficiency of His work as the Savior of sinners and gives this general Gospel promise that whosoever believes will be saved. And my friend, that's where I believe Him. You say, "I can't figure that out. You've told us, and it seems clear from the Word, that we don't believe in order to be born again. We're born again that we might believe. Well, then surely, we ought to occupy ourselves with asking, do I feel the motions of the divine birth so that I have a warrant to believe?" No, my friend, the warrant to believe is not in anything you feel in yourself. It's in what God declares to you in Jesus Christ. He

has been lifted up a Savior for sinners. He has freely and sincerely offered to all sinners in the Gospel with the promise that whosoever believes shall not perish but have eternal life in Him. But you say, "I sought to believe, and at times I thought I believed. What shall I do?" You continue to look out of yourself and to the uplifted Christ and cry to God that you may be able to lay hold of Him with that faith that will bring you to a certain knowledge that in Christ your sins are pardoned and you are accepted in the Beloved.

I close with the words of John Owen, words that are haunting words. John Owen said that men and women, boys and girls make two tragic mistakes when it comes to the matter of their own souls, and those two mistakes are these: number one, to think that they may get to heaven without the new birth, and secondly, to think they have the new birth without a life of holiness. The wise Puritan, pastor, theologian said these were the two most frequent undoing mistakes he observed as a man of God. Are you in one of those categories, thinking you'll get to heaven and you know nothing of the new birth or saying, "O yes, I've been born again", and those five things John says always accompany the new birth are not true of you? My friend, don't believe the devil's lie. Except one be born of the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom. And if you are born of the Spirit, you're no longer under the dominion of sin and the world. But you are Christ's bondman, bondwoman seeking to live in the strength of His Spirit to His praise.

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